



Educated

Tara Westover

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Tara Westover grew up preparing for the End of Days, watching for the sun to darken, for the moon to drip as if with blood. She spent her summers bottling peaches and her winters rotating emergency supplies, hoping that when the World of Men failed, her family would continue on, unaffected.

She hadn't been registered for a birth certificate. She had no school records because she'd never set foot in a classroom, and no medical records because her father didn't believe in doctors or hospitals. According to the state and federal government, she didn't exist.

As she grew older, her father became more radical, and her brother, more violent. At sixteen Tara decided to educate herself. Her struggle for knowledge would take her far from her Idaho mountains, over oceans and across continents, to Harvard and to Cambridge. Only then would she wonder if she'd travelled too far. If there was still a way home.

EDUCATED is an account of the struggle for self-invention. It is a tale of fierce family loyalty, and of the grief that comes with the severing of the closest of ties. With the acute insight that distinguishes all great writers, Westover has, from her singular experience, crafted a universal coming-of-age story, one that gets to the heart of what an education is and what it offers – the perspective to see one's life through new eyes, and the will to change it.

Educated Details

Educated

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Bill Gates says

I've always prided myself on my ability to teach myself things. Whenever I don't know a lot about something, I'll read a textbook or watch an online course until I do.

I thought I was pretty good at teaching myself—until I read Tara Westover's memoir *Educated*. Her ability to learn on her own blows mine right out of the water. I was thrilled to sit down with her recently to talk about the book.

Tara was raised in a Mormon survivalist home in rural Idaho. Her dad had very non-mainstream views about the government. He believed doomsday was coming, and that the family should interact with the health and education systems as little as possible. As a result, she didn't step foot in a classroom until she was 17, and major medical crises went untreated (her mother suffered a brain injury in a car accident and never fully recovered).

Because Tara and her six siblings worked at their father's junkyard from a young age, none of them received any kind of proper homeschooling. She had to teach herself algebra and trigonometry and self-studied for the ACT, which she did well enough on to gain admission to Brigham Young University. Eventually, she earned her doctorate in intellectual history from Cambridge University. (Full disclosure: she was a Gates Scholar, which I didn't even know until I reached that part of the book.)

Educated is an amazing story, and I get why it's spent so much time on the top of the *New York Times* bestseller list. It reminded me in some ways of the Netflix documentary *Wild, Wild Country*, which I recently watched. Both explore people who remove themselves from society because they have these beliefs and knowledge that they think make them more enlightened. Their belief systems benefit from their separateness, and you're forced to be either in or out.

But unlike *Wild, Wild Country*—which revels in the strangeness of its subjects—*Educated* doesn't feel voyeuristic. Tara is never cruel, even when she's writing about some of her father's most fringe beliefs. It's clear that her whole family, including her mom and dad, is energetic and talented. Whatever their ideas are, they pursue them.

Of the seven Westover siblings, three of them—including Tara—left home, and all three have earned Ph.D.s. Three doctorates in one family would be remarkable even for a more "conventional" household. I think there must've been something about their childhood that gave them a degree of toughness and helped them persevere. Her dad taught the kids that they could teach themselves anything, and Tara's success is a testament to that.

I found it fascinating how it took studying philosophy and history in school for Tara to trust her own perception of the world. Because she never went to school, her worldview was entirely shaped by her dad. He believed in conspiracy theories, and so she did, too. It wasn't until she went to BYU that she realized there were other perspectives on things her dad had presented as fact. For example, she had never heard of the Holocaust until her art history professor mentioned it. She had to research the subject to form her own opinion that was separate from her dad's.

Her experience is an extreme version of something everyone goes through with their parents. At some point in your childhood, you go from thinking they know everything to seeing them as adults with limitations. I'm sad that Tara is estranged from a lot of her family because of this process, but the path she's taken and the life she's built for herself are truly inspiring.

When you meet her, you don't have any impression of all the turmoil she's gone through. She's so articulate

about the traumas of her childhood, including the physical abuse she suffered at the hands of one brother. I was impressed by how she talks so candidly about how naïve she once was—most of us find it difficult to talk about our own ignorance.

I was especially interested to hear her take on polarization in America. Although it's not a political book, *Educated* touches on a number of the divides in our country: red states versus blue states, rural versus urban, college-educated versus not. Since she's spent her whole life moving between these worlds, I asked Tara what she thought. She told me she was disappointed in what she called the "breaking of charity"—an idea that comes from the Salem witch trials and refers to the moment when two members of the same group break apart and become different tribes.

"I worry that education is becoming a stick that some people use to beat other people into submission or becoming something that people feel arrogant about," she said. "I think education is really just a process of self-discovery—of developing a sense of self and what you think. I think of [it] as this great mechanism of connecting and equalizing."

Tara's process of self-discovery is beautifully captured in *Educated*. It's the kind of book that I think everyone will enjoy, no matter what genre you usually pick up. She's a talented writer, and I suspect this book isn't the last we'll hear from her. I can't wait to see what she does next.

Will Byrnes says

On the highway below, the school bus rolls past without stopping. I am only 7, but I understand that it is this fact more than any other that makes my family different. We don't go to school. Dad worries that the government will force us to go, but it can't because it doesn't know about us. Four of my parents' seven children don't have birth certificates. We have no medical records because we were born at home and have never seen a doctor or nurse. We have no school records because we've never set foot in a classroom.

Educated is both a tale of hope and a record of horror. We know from the first page of her book that Tara Westover is a bright woman, a gifted writer with an impressive, poetic command of language. But her early life offered no clue that she would become a Cambridge PhD or a brilliant memoirist. She was the youngest of seven children born to Gene and Faye (not their real names) Westover, fundamentalist, survivalist Mormons, in rural Idaho.

Tara Westover - image from her *The Times*

We had a farm which belonged to my grandfather, and we had a salvage yard full of crumpled-up cars which belonged to my father. And my mother was a - she was an herbalist and a midwife. And as children, we spent a lot of hours walking on the mountain, gathering rose hips and mullein flowers that she could stew into tinctures. So in a lot of ways, it was a very beautiful childhood. - from NPR interview

The children constituted his workforce in Gene's scrapyard. Father was the law in their household, but it was a rule informed as much by significant mental health issues as it was by his ardent religious beliefs. In a less rural, less patriarchal, less religious community, theirs could easily have been deemed an unsafe environment. The scrapyard was a particularly dangerous place.

...he just didn't have that bone in his head that said, this is dangerous; don't do this. And he had a really hard time understanding injuries even after they had happened and how severe they were. I just - I don't know what it was about the way his mind worked. He just wasn't able to do that. - from NPR interview

Ruby Ridge had occurred when Tara was five, and fed her father's paranoia. Everyone had to have head-for-the-hills bags for when the government, Deep State, Illuminati, choose your own boogeyman, would come for them. He had a profound distrust of the medical profession, believing that doctors were agents of Satan, intent on doing harm. He saw the herbalism Faye practiced as the only true, righteous treatment for one's ills, calling her products "god's pharmacy." And he practiced what he preached, for himself as well as for his children, even after suffering a devastating injury. Maybe not an ideal way to make sure your kids reach adulthood in one piece.

View from Buck Peak - image from Westover's site

Home schooling was also less than idyllic, with mom's attention spread not only over seven children but to her work as an herbalist and later, in addition, a midwife. Luke had a learning disability, frustrating mom, who really had hoped to educate them all. Dad undermined this, dragging the kids out to do chores and learn *practical* skills. Eventually mom gave up. Education consisted of Faye dropping them at the Carnegie Library in town, where they could read whatever they wanted. Dad rustled the boys at 7am, but Tyler, who had an affinity for math, would often remain inside, studying, until dad dragged him out.

...there was not a lot of school taking place. We had books, and occasionally we would be kind of sent to read them. But for example, I was the youngest child, and I never took an exam, or I never wrote an essay for my mother that she read or nothing like kind of getting everyone together and having anything like a lecture. So it was a lot more kind of if you wanted to read a book, you could, but you certainly weren't going to be made to do that. - from NPR interview

Successful schooling or not, Tara acquired a desire for and love of learning. Tyler, a black sheep, not only loved books but music, as well. This was a major tonic for Tara, who was smitten with the classical and choral music her brother would play on his boom box. Not only did she find a love for music, but she discovered that she has a gift for singing. Being a part (often the star) of the town musical productions gave her greater contact with peers outside her family than she had ever had before. It formed one pillar of her desire to go to school, to college, to study music. (I included a link in EXTRA STUFF to a music video in which she sings lead, so you can hear for yourself.)

At age seventeen, Tara Westover attended her first school class, at BYU, clueless about much of what was common knowledge for everyone else, resulting in her asking a question in class about a word everyone, I mean everyone, knows. Oopsy.

Her intellectual broadening and education forms one powerful thread in her story. How her natural curiosity emerged, was nurtured, discouraged, and ultimately triumphed. The other thread consists of the personal, emotional, psychological, religious, and cultural challenges she had to overcome to become her own person.

The world in which Westover was raised was one in which a powerful patriarchy, fed by a fundamentalist religious beliefs, applied its considerable pressure to push her into what was considered the proper role for a young woman, namely homemaker, mother, probably following in her mother's dual careers as herbalist and midwife. And what about what was the right course for Tara? There was some wiggle room. Once dad sees her perform on stage, he is smitten, and softens to her musical leanings. Male siblings had been allowed to go to college. But every step outside the expectations, the rules, came at a cost. Do something different and

lose a piece of connection to your family. And family was extremely important, particularly for a person whose entire life had been defined by family, much more so than for pretty much anyone who might read her book.

Westover as a wee Idaho spud - image from the NY Post

A piece of this proscribed existence was a tolerance for aberrant behavior. Father was domineering, and was feckless about physical danger, even as it applied to his children. And distrustful of the medical establishment. His solution for infected tonsils was to have Tara stand outside with her mouth open to allow in the sun's healing rays. Severe injuries, including Tara having her leg punctured by razor-like scrap-metal, a brother suffering severe burns on one leg, and even dad himself suffering catastrophic third-degree burns in a junkyard explosion, were to be treated by home-brew tinctures. He was also extremely moody, a characteristic that carried forward in some of the family genes.

Tara's ten-years-older brother, Shawn, was a piece of work. She felt close to him at times. He could be kind and understanding in a way that moved her. He even saved her life in a runaway horse incident. But he had a reputation as a bar brawler, as a person eager to fight. Sometimes his rages turned on his own family. And it was not just rage, sparked by trivialities, but cruelty, to the point of sadism. Tara was one of the objects of his madness. Dare oppose him and he would twist her arm to the point of spraining, drag her by her hair, force her face into unspeakable places and demand apologies for imagined offenses. Possibly even worse than this was her family's denial about it, even when it occurred right in front of them. It is this denial that was hardest to bear. If your own parents will betray you, will not look out for you, in the face of such blatant attacks, then what is the value of the thing you hold most dear in the world?

All abuse, no matter what kind of abuse it is, foremost, an assault on the mind. Because if you're going to abuse someone I think you have to invade their reality, in order to distort it, and you have to convince them of two things. You have to convince them that what you're doing isn't that bad. Which means you have to normalize it. You have to justify it, rationalize it. And the other thing you have to convince them of is that they deserve it. -
from C-span interview

Her brother, alias as "Shawn" in the book, was a master manipulator, who, for years, succeeded magnificently in persuading Tara that what she had just experienced had never really happened.

One frustrating aspect of the book is Tara's dispiriting, but also grating ability to doubt herself, to allow others in her life, bullies, to persuade her she does not think what she is thinking, that she does not feel what she is feeling that she did not see what she has seen. She was living in a gaslit world in which multiple individuals, people who supposedly loved her, were telling her that what she had seen was an illusion, and that bad things that other people did were somehow her fault. *Honey, wake the hell up. How many time ya gonna let these awful people get away with this crap?* That gets old well before the end. I was very much reminded of victims of domestic abuse, who convince themselves that *they* must have done *something* to cause, to deserve the violence they suffer. One can only hope that she has been able to vanquish this self-blaming propensity completely by now. Years of therapy have surely helped.

Tara at Cambridge - image from Salt Lake City Tribune

She struggles with the yin and yang of her upbringing and finding her true self. Her father was extreme, but also loving. Her abusive brother had a very kind side to him. Her mother was supportive, but was also a betrayer. Her parents wanted what they truly thought was best for her, but ultimately attempted to extinguish the true Tara. The dichotomy in the book is gripping. At times it reads like *How Green Was My Valley*, an

upbringing that was idyllic, rich with history and lore, both community and family, and featuring a strong bond to the land. Their home was at the foot of Buck Peak, which sported an almost magical feature that looked like an Indian Princess, and was the source of legends. At others, it is like a horror novel, a testament to the power of reality-bending, indoctrination, and maybe even Stockholm Syndrome. How she survived feeling like the alien she was in BYU and later Cambridge, is amazing, and a testament to her inner strength and intellectual gifts. Westover caught a few breaks over the course of her life, teachers, one at BYU, another at Cambridge, who spot the diamond in her rough, and help her in her educational quest. Reading of this support, I had the same weepy joyful feeling as when Hagrid informs a very young lad, "Yer a wizard, Harry."

When setting out to write the book, Westover had no clue how to go about it, well, this sort of a book, anyway. She had already written a doctoral thesis. But she did have stacks of journals she'd been keeping since she was ten. In figuring out how to get from wish to realization, one important resource was listening to the New Yorker fiction podcast, with its focus on short stories. And she took in plenty of books on writing. It is certainly clear that, just as she had the wherewithal to go from no-school to doctorate at Cambridge, she has shown an ability to figure out how to write a moving, compelling memoir. *Educated* is a triumph, a remarkable work, beautifully told, of the journey from an isolated, fundamentalist, survivalist childhood, through the trials of becoming, to adulthood as an erudite and accomplished survivor. It is a powerful look at the ties, benefits, and perils of families. Ultimately, *Educated* is a rewarding odyssey you do not want to miss.

Review Posted – 3/23/18

Published – 2/20/18

November 29, 2018 - *Educated* is named as one of The 10 Best Books of 2018

December 2019 - *Educated* is named winner of the 2018 Goodreads Choice Award for memoirs, beating out Michelle Obamas's blockbuster hit, *Becoming*. From a GR interview with Westover

Goodreads: Congratulations on your win! What does the award and all the support from Goodreads readers mean to you?

Tara Westover: I'm really, really excited about it. It's great when the highbrow powers that be, the literary giants, say, "Oh, you wrote a good book," but it does mean something extra when it's readers, when it's people interacting with the book in a personal way, not just because they like the language or not because they think it's doing something bold with the form, but because they had an experience with it. That means something a little bit different and a little bit extra. A readers' award is a really exciting one.

=====EXTRA STUFF

Links to the author's personal, Twitter and FB pages

Although the internet yielded no vids of Tara singing lead in her town's production of *Annie* in the wayback, here is one of grown-up Tara singing lead vocal on The Hills of Aran with John Meed

Interviews

----- C-Span - interviewed by Susannah Cahalan – video – 1 hour – If you can manage only one of these, this

is the one to see

-----CBS This Morning - video – 6:41

-----Penguin promotional video – 7:01

-----Channel 4 News - 8:46

-----NPR - with Dave Davies – the link includes text of the interview. There is a link on the page to the full audio interview – 38:18 - This is the source for several quotes used in the review, and is definitely worth a look and/or listen

-----GoodReads interview

A sample of the audiobook, read by Julia Whelan, on Soundcloud

A brief interview with Westover and Whelan re the making of the audiobook - on Signature

Debra says

"It's strange how you give the people you love so much power over you"

I am in the minority on this one, but this did not blow me away. I wanted to read this after seeing so many high ratings. I was expecting to love this book but ended up feeling meh about it. I actually wanted to hurry the book up in parts and other times found it to be a little repetitive. There were other times I wanted her to go into more detail or explain things more. One thing I had an issue with is that her family is described as survivalists who educated their children at home - many of which do not even have a birth certificate - but then they had many modern conveniences. Her father has a junkyard and a huge distrust of the government. Her Mother becomes a midwife at her husband's urging and makes tinctures and uses herbs to cure those in her family and in their community. I do realize that the family acquired the telephone due to her Mother's job as a mid-wife but then I wondered how they paid for everything. .

Tara grows up free or wild. She didn't bathe that often, didn't wash her hands after using the restroom, and is unaware of world history, and is quite comfortable living around bad odors and smells. She is abused by an older brother and no one seems to notice, intervene, or even care. They seem to be a reckless group - example: multiple car accidents, etc.

I had a hard time believing some of the information presented. Case in point the first car accident in the book, Tara's father offered to pay for the damaged tractor. Where did they get the money? Just how much does farm equipment cost? It's not cheap, I know that. Even if the farm equipment purchased is used it still must be pricey. Plus, the damage to their car would mean they would need to purchase another. Then the family has another car accident. More money, lots of injuries, possible need for another vehicle, etc. I am not saying that none of this happened, but I had a lot of questions about how things were paid for

Plus, this family seemed to be very accident prone, falling from surfaces, fires, head injuries. Was this because they were raised without any rules and became reckless, or did bad things just happen to them?

Tara does want a better life for herself. She does educate herself at home, so she can pass the test to get into College. College isn't cheap, nor are books, nor is housing or food. Again, I wondered how she paid for all of this. Plus, once she got to college, she didn't seem to mind that her roommates were upset with the smell in their home. Dirty dishes, not bathing, not having clean clothes. I get if this is the norm, in the home she grew up in but when faced with other's displeasure, I would think a smart girl like her would have taken the hint that being clean and living in a clean environment is the norm, not how she was raised. Plus, at home a young man even pointed out to her that her home smelled as did she.

There was a part of this book that I did enjoy. Tara's thirst for knowledge and teaching herself and gaining

entrance to college without a formal education. I appreciated her struggles and having to learn how to "learn". She went on to achieve a lot in her life and it is impressive and commendable. Tara definitely was an under dog and I did root for her. She definitely changed her life and sought for better for herself. Even without a lot of support from her family, she found strength and kept going. This is what shined for me in this book with otherwise left me with questions. Who doesn't want to root for her? I did. Having said that, there were just too many questions raised why reading this. I don't care if someone is a survivalist, I would think one would still want their children to be safe and free of harm. The turning the blind eye to abuse was despicable. The family also had a lot of modern conveniences which did not gel with my idea of what a survivalist family would own or not own. But I am no expert on survivalist families. Her father clearly had some mental health issues and they contributed to his beliefs and possibly to their way of life. Yes, she suffered abuse. Yes, she grew up in a home with an untreated mentally ill parent, yes, it is all very sad but it was still not enough to make me enjoy the book.

What worked for me in this book was Tara's drive for a better life. How with very little support from her family, she went out on her own and obtained an education. I appreciated her drive and determination. Her book is well written and I realize this is her account of how she remembers things from her perspective. I just was left with questions hence the 3 star rating.

Again, in the minority with this one. Most love this book. It just wasn't for me.

I received a copy of this book from Random House Publishing group and NetGalley in exchange for an honest review.

See more of my reviews at www.openbookpost.com

From Reader Review Educated for online ebook

From reader reviews:

Kenneth Sisk:

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Richard Hunt:

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Richard Burnett:

A lot of people always spent their own free time to vacation as well as go to the outside with them friends and family or their friend. Do you realize? Many a lot of people spent they will free time just watching TV, or perhaps playing video games all day long. In order to try to find a new activity honestly, that is look different you can read any book. It is really fun in your case. If you enjoy the book that you just read you can spent the entire day to reading a e-book. The book Educated it is very good to read. There are a lot of people who recommended this book. These were enjoying reading this book. If you did not have enough space bringing this book you can buy the actual e-book. You can m0ore effortlessly to read this book out of your smart phone. The price is not too costly but this book offers high quality.

Matthew Russell:

Educated can be one of your basic books that are good idea. Most of us recommend that straight away because this guide has good vocabulary that will increase your knowledge in terminology, easy to understand, bit entertaining but delivering the information. The writer giving his/her effort to place every word into enjoyment arrangement in writing Educated however doesn't forget the main place, giving the reader the hottest and based confirm resource info that maybe you can be one of it. This great information can certainly drawn you into brand new stage of crucial thinking.

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